

Youth (Dis) Engagement:

The Importance of Communication, Agency, Responsive Caring and Empowerment

Samantha Dobler

MacEwan University

### Abstract

Do youth who disengage from society find their way into the criminal justice system or does the criminal justice system lead youth to disengage from society? This paper aims to contribute a student's perspective on the (dis)engagement debate. In other words, to dispel the myth that "disengaged youth" just don't care. Drawing on a critical, youth justice perspective, this paper conceptualizes youth engagement while also examining the bridges and barriers contributing to social inclusion/exclusion. A conceptual CARE model was developed with the intention of increasing access and acceptance for youth. Practical questions are posed concerning social support availability and opportunities for young people to contribute in meaningful ways to their community. Further, the role of the professional or the adult is examined and evaluated in terms of what can be done to change the conversation both about and with youth.

### Introduction

This paper offers an undergraduate post-secondary student's emergent understanding of critical youth studies and the issue of youth engagement based on an independent study course.

Throughout this paper the student researcher looks at the central engagement and disengagement debate surrounding youth. The central theme is changing the conversation both *about* and *with* youth. The research challenges the popular notion that youth don't care, and consequently, they disengage. Rather, the researcher states that youth disengage because they are looking for a type of care that is not urgently available to them. First, this paper will explore who youth are, how they are characterised and what makes them different from children or (young) adults. Next, this paper will look at the current literature about youth engagement and disengagement in order to more clearly identify different factors involved. This paper will also explore the four levels of engagement a youth may experience. Following this discussion, the paper examines various sociological and psychological barriers that youth face, which lead them to either engage or disengage. Finally, a CARE model will be presented, and the importance of care and youth engagement will be articulated. Throughout the paper there will be thematic undertones which highlight the importance of popular discourse surrounding youth and the conversations that are had as a starting place for transformation. When the conversation is changed, the popular notion that youth don't care is challenged and instead they are viewed as searching for a type of care that is not readily available to them. When we challenge this discourse, we create a safe environment in which a youth can learn how to build resiliency and empowerment through responsive care.

This research was conducted because I believe that you need to be the change. Throughout the course of my Undergraduate Degree at MacEwan University, I have been provided with the opportunity to explore Sociology and Psychology on a broad level. However, throughout this Independent Study, I have explored the specifics of the youth (dis)engagement debate at greater depth. As an active member in the community, I see the value in creating opportunities for positive changes in that community. To do this, research must be done that identifies issues, or a problem area that need to be addressed so that positive change can occur. As a volunteer for youth justice committees, as well as activist on advocacy groups, I have a strong appreciation for giving a voice to the voiceless. With the youth of today being the next generation of leaders, it makes sense to me that we spend time trying to help them be the best versions of themselves they can be. I believe that I have always been a Change Maker, and doing that, involves caring about something more than just myself. To see positive change in the community, the change must start with the young, as it is known that it takes time for change to occur.

### Who are youth?

Before delving into the literature, it is important to note how youth are in a constant process of becoming (Worth, 2009). Not only are youth stuck in between childhood and adulthood, they are also in a process of transitioning from being dependent to independent as well as developing a sense of who they are. Being a youth means that you are in the part of your life where you are no longer a child and you are not yet an adult. Youth does not have a specific or sole definition as it could be interpreted or understood in different ways, through different contexts (Worth, 2009). For the purpose of this research, youth will be defined as an individual between the ages of 12-

18, of any gender, race or ethnic background. “Youth hood” is socially constructed through the experiences that shape an individual’s identity, and level of dependency on the rest of their community. Transitions are perceived to be a fluid state of always becoming, of arrival, of departure (Ross & Gray, 2005). A large part of engagement or disengagement must have to do with transitioning, and different types of transitions that youth go through. Therefore, youth going through transitions are trying to get to the other end; however, as they are trying to make it to that end, they are constantly undergoing change and, at times, turmoil.

There are other terms that are used to describe a youth in the popular discourse such as; adolescent, teenage, kid, young person or young adult. When looking at the Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA). Youth are defined as individuals who are above the age of 12 years old but younger than 18 at the time that they committed the offence. Although youth aged 12-17 can be sentenced as adults under certain conditions, these are the general guidelines they follow (Case, 2006). For the purposes of this research and for understanding youth category, I believe consistency is important therefore here we will identify youth as any individual male or female or other, who is between the ages of 12-17.

Current popular discourse around youth is not framed in a positive way. Much of the popular discourse around youth, specifically points at areas that others view as flaws in that youth. A common phrase heard about youth is “kids these days,” which maybe without knowing it is starting to shape the identity of youth. Further than that, saying like “because I am the adult and I said so,” take away power from the youth, further distancing them from being authorized knowers of their own situations (Smyth & Eaton-Erickson, 2009). Further, there is also the damaging popular discourse that youth just don’t care, which is why they misbehave, act out or

disengage. This way of speaking, however, places the onus of change exclusively on the youth, relieving the adults of the responsibility of youth engagement.

The power of conversation is underestimated when it comes to the extent to which it affects a youth, their image of themselves and their sense of developing self. Sociologically speaking, identity is shaped by the way that we see ourselves in the world, while comparing it against the way that we imagine the world sees us (Worth, 2009). Therefore, if we want to see a positive change in the youth who we speak about, we need to first change the way that we speak about the youth.

### Engaged and Disengaged

Engagement is defined as the action – meaningful participation – of being engaged in something, while disengagement is defined as the actions of ending your engagement with something. More than just a simple definition of engagement, there is no one clear way to define these. From the literature, something that has been made clear is that to understand engagement one must understand that engagement is subjective (Wilson et al, 2007). From this understanding of subjectivity, one can also understand that there are different degrees of engagement that can exist, making this debate even more complex to untangle. When speaking about engagement as a continuum it implies that youth are not engaged or disengaged, one or the other. Rather, there are different degrees of engagement, whose interpretation is determined by those gauging the engagement.

When a student is in a classroom, are they engaged by just showing up to class? Or, do they need to be prepared and pay attention to be classified as engaged? Engagement along a continuum allows us to see important nuances and diversity across lives and experiences.

Therefore, one student who may be more introverted than extraverted may be gauged differently in their engagement by a teacher. It is not that a youth is engaged or disengaged but on an engagement continuum there can be different degrees of (dis)engagement. The literature has shown that there is not just one type of engagement. In fact, I have found four types of engagement throughout the literature (Wilson et al, 2001; Wilson et al, 2011; McNamara, 2000). There is what we would define as positive engagement, where a youth is engaging in a way that is judged to be beneficial to the youth and promote wider engagement in the community. An example of this would be a youth who attends school, participates in sports, and is involved in their community peer groups. Next, there is positive disengagement, where a youth who is engaging in negative activities chooses to remove themselves from that, resulting in a positive change, thereby positive disengagement. An example of this is a youth who uses substances who chooses to positively disengage from his peer group when trying to get clean. The third type of engagement found is negative engagement, which occurs when a youth chooses to engage in behaviour that can result in youth participating in negative activities (e.g. deviant or harmful). The fourth type of engagement is called negative disengagement. Here is where a youth chooses to disengage from a positive situation, which results in negative consequences (e.g. lack of social bonds). An example of this would be a youth who no longer attends school, and decides to continue to disengage from the teachers and other peers.

From the literature, I have been inspired to add to the conversation. Although there is previously literature that highlights the different type of engagement, there was nothing in the literature about how engagement is subjective and exists along a continuum. I believe that this is an important feature to emerge from the research because it highlights the fact that our judgement of who is or isn't engaged may be an arbitrary decision made by people outside of the

situation rather than an authentic one from the perspective of the young person. This is important when thinking about the individuality of youth, and given how youth are in a constant process of becoming. Moreover, engagement is not a static behaviour that does or does not take place. Instead, it is dynamic, and it changes and this is where we can see how there are various degrees of engagement.

Youth engagement can become a way for adult to categorize according to beliefs and assumptions they hold that may oppose the values youth have or their own perceptions of themselves. However, it is not just that youth are engaged or disengaged. Moreover, it is the environment that fosters dis/engagement. Consistent and supportive environments can help to cultivate willingness, motivation, and capacity for youth to be engaged (Zeldin, 2004). An important thing to come from this research is how various bridges and barrier that youth face which lead youth to engage or disengage from the community (Lovelace et al, 2010). As previously identified there are both psychological barriers that youth face and also sociological barriers that are youth experience.

Mendes et al, focus on how a significant proportion of young people leaving out of home care make their transition through the youth justice system which, in turn, exposes them to further risks. These risks are what reduce the likelihood that a youth will fully socially engage in mainstream society. The authors identified specific factors that were likely to lead a youth to disengage from home care and engage in the juvenile justice system. First, the authors identified unresolved trauma and substance abuse as a possible risk factor for a youth. Although the association between substance abuse and offending has been established in mainstream literature regarding offenders, offending is often seen as a mean to enable substance abuse. Next, the authors identified environmental factors such as association with offending peers and family



involvement with the criminal justice system. I think that this is an important point they raise when we consider transitions. If a youth is expected to transition into a certain role, which is shaped by parents and peers, then being involved in the criminal justice system seems normative. Next, systemic factors are likely to influence youth to engage in the juvenile system such as: school expulsion, care system instability, and lack of post care supports, and inadequate resources.

In conclusion, *when* appears more significant is *when* a youth engages with the engagement cycle but *how* they initially become involved that is a predictor of the success of a youth in (dis)engaging. Once again, this highlights the importance of conceptualizing engagement as a subjective process and to acknowledge different degrees of engagement within this cycle, or continuum.

#### Development of a CARE Model: The Dobler Model

What can be done to help to change the conversation both about and with youth? Based on this independent study and research I developed a conceptual CARE model to inform and affect change. In particular, change the conversation with about and with youth engagement. The CARE model involves 4 key aspects of caring, including: 1) communicating with the intent to connect; 2) unpacking assumptions, giving agency and authorized knowers status; 3) respect and responsive caring; and 4) empowerment and embracing change. (This model is presented on page 17.) In "The Power of Meaningful Connections" (TEDxUAlberta) Joanne Minaker develops four important ways to make meaningful connections using the word as an acrostic (C.A.R.E.). She explains how communication (C), acknowledgement (A), respect (R), and encouragement (E) are fundamental practices for humanizing social justice through meaningful

and caring relationships. Informed by this, I developed my own lens for understanding youth (dis)engagement.

When speaking about communicating with the intent to connect the model is referring to taking the time to make a genuine connection with a youth. Smyth and Eaton-Erikson (2009) created focus groups, as well as did qualitative interviews with various youth who had been unsuccessful with social workers in the past. The researchers were interested in knowing what the youth felt made them unsuccessful with workers in the past, as opposed to just asking the social workers what they thought about why the youth were not successful. The results of the focus groups and the interviews demonstrated a common theme: they felt that their care worker didn't care. It was as if the workers came for their 9-5 shift and didn't care what happened to the youth after that. By asking the youth what they thought of a situation, not only did Smyth & Eaton-Erikson find out an answer that would not have been provided by the social workers, but they could identify a barrier for the youth as they themselves perceived it. The youth felt that they were not a priority for their workers, and that no matter that they did, their workers viewed them as a failure, and would eventually give up (Smyth & Eaton-Erikson, 2009). The authors demonstrated the importance of fluid communication between an adult and youth. To me, this is important when it comes to changing the conversation about how we view why youth are disengaging from a situation. This information would not have been the same and is not the same as other studies that were conducted which show that youth are unsuccessful because of their "motivation drive, personality etc." this puts the onus of the failure on the youth, when the youth are demonstrating that the onus is on the adults to help the youth be successful.

The reason that Smyth Eaton-Erickson could extract this information was because they made the youth the authorized knowers of their own lives. In doing this they gave the youth agency to

participate in something that gave them a voice. More than giving them a voice, it changed the conversation. The popular discourse around why youth are unsuccessful was that they didn't care, but this research demonstrated that they were indeed searching for a form of care that was not available to them. When the popular discourse with social workers is that youth don't care, what image does that give the youth, both in the eyes of the worker and the youth.

Next, the conceptual model that I have created looks at the issues of assumptions agency and authorized knowers. From the literature, an example of making youth authorized knowers that inspired this conceptual model was the Photovoice project conducted by YES! (Wilson et al, 2007). Researchers gave youth the opportunity to be authorized knowers on their own needs and story tellers of their own lives. The researchers provided disposable camera and film and asked Jr. High students in low income areas to take pictures of their lives. As a thank you for participating in this study, youth were told that the researcher would develop all of their pictures for them. Before the photos were handed back to the youth, a content analysis was done on all of the photos in order to categorize the needs of the youth. Common themes that were present in the photos were: homelessness, substances in the home, bullying, familial abuse as well as sexual abuse. Often when abuse is suspected in the home, formal psychological assessments or interventions with Child and Social Services is involved. By conducting this research Wilson et. al., were able to identify a variety of harms that were presented in a youth's life that were causing them to negatively disengage or engage (2005). The importance of this research shows that often even though the intention of meaningful communication is met, sometimes, just asking what the problem is may not be the most effective way of extracting an answer. This research shows that by giving the youth some sort of agency and by making them the authorized knower, there is the potential to learn more about the psychological and sociological barriers that these youth are

facing. This can potentially lead them to engage or disengage in various ways. Although these researchers made a positive step towards providing the youth with an opportunity to voice their concerns, or to demonstrate their barriers through photos, there was no mention of how these authors followed through to help meet the needs of the youth.

Given this glaring omission (the lack of follow-up presented in the previously mentioned study), the next part of the conceptual CARE model was developed. Respect and responsive caring to the needs presented by the youth is needed to create resiliency in youth. More than just caring, a youth needs to experience responsive caring, this means that the adult, or care worker must do more than just create a constant cycle of responding to the needs of youth (Mendes et al, 2014). Often programs that are developed for youth are done as a response to their behaviour, and are only activated or used when the youth is in trouble. Instead, programs need to be created in that highlight the importance of assisting youth build resiliency to help them through these transitions. By making a meaningful connection with youth, and listening to their needs, professionals could be more responsive in their care provision and offer youth tools they can use to successfully re-engage or transition.

I believe that the CARE model can be used to create resiliency in youth, through the act of responsive caring. And, as the literature I presented has shown, here we can see potential for youth to successfully re-engage in the community in positive ways. I went into this research with an idea on how CARE could help reduce negative disengagement and increase positive engagement. Although I could connect the different areas of CARE, to the literature, I found new connections of CARE concerning transitions, engagement, disengagement, and community buy in. There is not one specific reading in my literature search that I felt demonstrated effective responsive caring which is why it is being implemented in the CARE model.

Finally, the model comes together with empowerment and embracing change. Christens and Peterson focus on the importance of empowerment when it comes to successful youth development (2012). Looking at the sociopolitical controls that are placed on youth, the authors examine the degree to which empowerment shapes youth. Christens and Peterson define empowerment as the intrapersonal component which refers to the self-perceptions of efficacy and control that an individual has in any given situation (2012). What was more interesting for me were the connections the authors make to environmental conditions playing a role in shaping a youth. The results of the study support the role that psychological empowerment plays in regards to family cohesion and self-esteem. I will link all of this back into my own conceptual CARE model and the development of my own Youth Care Philosophy (See page 16). When youth felt that they were not cared about and their workers did not care what happened to them they are more likely to further disengage from community supports and opportunities (Smyth, Eaton-Erickson, 2016). The youth in both the Christens and Peterson (2012) and the Fergeson et. al.'s studies exemplify how empowerment can lead to positive engagement in the community by eliminating the psychological barriers that are often associated with youth disengagement (2011).

### Moving Forward

Where do we go from here? It is imperative for adults who are working with youth to change the way that they communicate both *with* and *about* youth. To do this, engagement must be thought of as a continuum, one that is subjective and has different degrees. I have learned engagement is more of a process, ongoing, dynamic rather than an outcome or endpoint. Each youth is different and the model is not a ubiquitous tool to be employed onto all youth. Rather, this model is a conceptual way to open the conversation and make a connection so youth know that there are adults who are willing to support them and that there are people who CARE about them. The

biggest lesson is how and why our lens – the way in which we see the world – should be one of care. It is important that as Youth Care Workers (among other roles), we don't give up, and that we don't view the struggles of a youth as reflecting their inability to change. It is also important that when working with youth engagement is understood as along a continuum or a cycle, one that is experienced as subjective. This conceptual care model offers a new lens for seeing youth in their own worlds. Social workers, probation officers, parole officers, teachers, care givers, parents, are just a few roles in which the adults or professionals need to demonstrate CARE in order to be successful supports for a youth. The conceptual model that I have created is one of just that, changing the conversation both about and with youth, implementing care, and recognizing the responsibility that adults play for providing support to youth who are going through transitions. It is intended to change not only the discourse of case, but also inform care practices (i.e. my own as a youth worker). These transitions can highlight various bridges and barriers that can lead a youth to (dis)engage in various ways, and during these times, youth need to know that they are supported.

Although we are speaking about high risk youth for the most part, or youth who have begun to negatively disengaging from the community, for all those youth who are on the “mainstream path,” there are also transitions and struggles they face. As high-risk youth are, all youth are going through the process of becoming (Worth, 2009). There is the extra level of re-integration that is required when we are talking about youth who are negatively disengaging. They need to help moving through their new roles and to create a clearer path, especially when lives of violence, despair, hopelessness and inadequate care have become normalized or expected of them. I believe that all youth are looking for a type of personal security (e.g. sense of identity), in which they are looking for a form of stability in their support systems (e.g. sense of social

acceptance). When the youth in the Smyth-Eaton Erikson (2009) study identified that their care workers didn't seem to care about them, this shows a lack of trust and stability within their institutional support system. This lack of personal security can lead to the youth feeling as though they are not worthy of care; not worth caring about. This supports the claim that I have made that the belief youth don't care is a misconception. Rather, youth are searching for a type of care that they can understand, and that is available to them, and meets them where they are at. Only then can they work collaboratively with caring adults to forge new paths toward where they want to go and who they desire to become.

One limitation in this study is that throughout this research, there has been little mention of other social factors that impact on a youth's life. Gender, race and socioeconomic status are all factors that can contribute to the engagement and disengagement of a youth. The various bridges and barriers that youth who are racialized or marginalized face, both individually and systematically, may be exacerbated, at times different, or perhaps occur in more extreme ways than for those in more privileged social locations. The bridges and barriers that were identified throughout this study are not the only ones that are out there, however, they are common among youth, regardless of their specific; age, gender, race, ethnicity, or risk level. However, just as engagement is subjective, and a continuum, as are identifying the variety of bridges and barriers that youth face.

"Mainstream youth" were not the main focus throughout this research. This was not to say that these youths do not experience transitions, processes of becoming or various systematic or individual barriers. However, this research was on the youth who are not considered mainstream given the additional barriers they face to make bridges to more promising futures. I believe all youth deserve a place within their communities. Changing the conversation is one key

step toward destabilizing the dichotomy between mainstream youth and marginalized youth and challenging the divide between youth and adults and truly becoming one, inclusive and caring society.

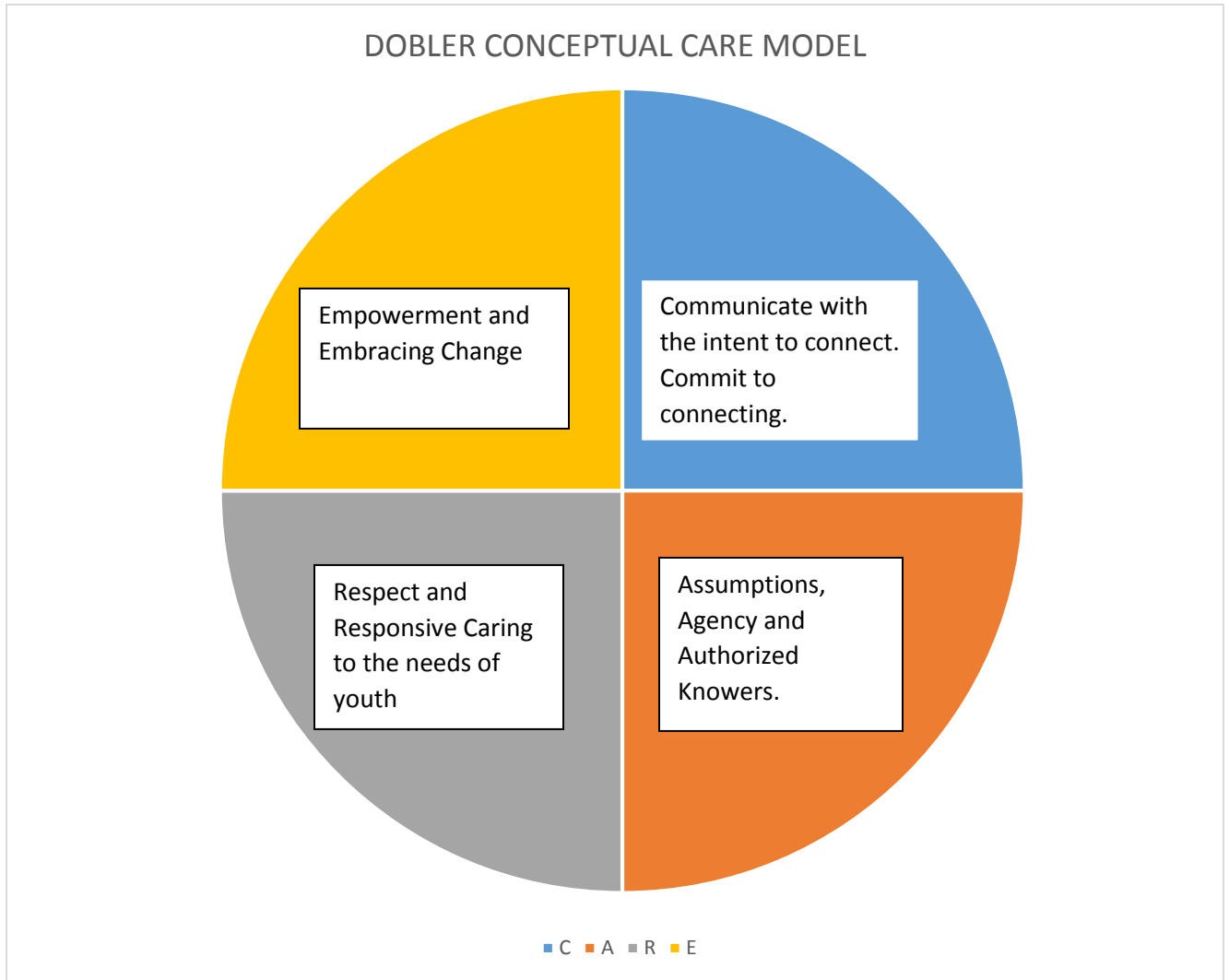
### Youth Care Philosophy

Pursuing my Undergraduate at MacEwan University has provided me with the opportunity to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the systemic forces and individual struggles that youth navigate when trying to positively engage in a variety of ways. Conducting this Independent Study under the Supervision of Dr. Joanne Minaker, has allowed me to study the engagement debate of youth more intensely. Further, this research has also allowed me to explore both psychological and sociological barriers that youth face. I believe that to make a meaningful change collaboration needs to happen between the worker and the youth, the parent and the youth or the teacher and the youth. To successfully make these connections, you need to be able to identify the sociological barriers that youth face, but also need to psychologically understand why they are having a problem crossing or overcoming them. Another part of my philosophy is the implementation of responsive care, to help enhance the resiliency that youth have and build confidence in that youth to overcome various barriers that they face.

My youth care philosophy can be seen throughout my CARE model; communicate with the intent to connect, drop assumptions and make the appropriate person the authorized knower to provide agency, respect and responsive care to the needs presented by youth and finally by empowering and embracing the change and enhancing resiliency in youth. This can all be done



by having a conversation, which challenges the popular discourses around youth which claim they don't care. Change happens through these conversations about HOW we speak about youth and popular discourses but also HOW we have conversations with youth. When we start to change the conversation, we start to challenge the notion that youth don't care, and can acknowledge how youth are often searching for a type of care that is not available to them. When the popular discourse around these youth changes, identities are shaped in more positive ways, and perhaps that can lead to youth who are more likely to positively engage in the community. In this way, youth workers foster and encourage youth to become engaged citizens, by acknowledging the bridges and barriers that they face, while enhancing their resiliency.



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